

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH.

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Paul's epistle to the Romans is the greatest literary production of that truly great author. Into it is crowded the greatest doctrine in the Christian structure, and in it that doctrine is elucidated with a force and clearness which bewilder and puzzle by their very force and clearness. Men look toward Paul, the scholar and profound logician, and fail to see him as the enthusiastic advocate of Jesus Christ, who is pleading with all the fervor of a fervid spiritual nature that all may come to know and accept the Christ to whom he has given his life and for whom he has suffered so much. Paul's life was hidden in Christ's life and the striving for Christlikeness for himself so overwhelmed and belittled all secular affairs that the only thought of his life was to gain some for Christ. With this view he pulled down or lifted up, praised or rebuked, brought forward or repressed, and so dealt with men and churches that the Pharisaical were silenced, the high-minded were humbled and the weak and retiring were encouraged to more active and open work. This seems to have been his mental condition when he wrote the epistle to the Romans. The church at Rome was composed of Jewish and Gentile Christians. Each class had accepted Christ, but each in his own way and with his own mental reservation. The Jews could not forget that they were God's own peculiar people, enjoying His favor in a special and to them highly gratifying degree. Having been trained through hundreds of generations to look upon circumcision and feasts and fasts as the essence and were loath to leave the old belief. And not the symbols of a peculiar life they even giving up the old traditions and practices they would fain regard the Jew as better than any one else by virtue of inherited Godliness as it were. To be able to trace a genealogy back through a long line to the patriarchs certainly gave them, according to their own standards of thinking, a right to deferential consideration on the part of these new Gentile converts who, until now, had been in their opinions aliens and strangers to God's

precious love and care. Consequently a great error was creeping into the church at Rome. By a clear line of reasoning from the old Jewish rites and ceremonies there grew up a strong belief among them of peace with God through the performance of certain works. That is by actively performing certain things they were made God's peculiar people. It was a heresy which endangered the Christian church then and has strongly menaced it ever since. The doctrine of "Justification by Works"; a more dangerous doctrine has never crept into the minds of men at any time, and yet within less than a half century after the glorious ascension of our Lord this leaven was at work. And it was just this state of affairs which called forth this wonderful letter from St. Paul. To appreciate what is contained in it one must firmly fix in his mind the circumstances which called forth the utterance, and then shutting out all preconceived notions and dispossessing for a time, if possible, his mind of all knowledge of anything contained in the New Testament, he is just in the position of those to whom it was written and can best intelligibly understand what St. Paul means.

There are several propositions laid down and developed which we shall notice: First, all are unrighteous and of themselves must continue to be so. Righteous means "right." Right is absolute; nearly right is not right. In mathematics a right line is a straight line. The least crook or curve in it, it is no longer a straight line. No matter how long you draw it and how absolutely straight you make it after the crook you cannot make it a straight line. It is a not-right-line. "Un," means not, so we have an unright line. Once a line is made unright by a single crook or turn it cannot be made right unless it be rubbed out. So with lives. A righteous life is a right life—a perfectly straight life—not an error or mistake anywhere from the cradle to the grave. Not a law of any kind, natural or spiritual broken. Not a single sin of omission or commission. The slightest turning aside makes it an unright life, because it is no longer a perfectly straight life.

Even if we can conceive of one who does nothing wrong, that does not exclude the idea of unright thoughts, and to entertain sinful thoughts is just as much unright as to do sinful deeds. Truly, as St. Paul says, "There is no distinction, for all have sinned". This then is the first proposition: Man's life is crooked, unright, unrighteous, and of himself he cannot change it.

Second, our unright lives separate us from God. God is right and truth, and anything which is not absolutely right and true cannot harmonize with Him. Between perfect harmony and discord in music there is but a half tone; a very little matter, indeed, but it mars the most beautiful composition. So even the least unrightness in our lives separates us from God. We need not do great sins, but even a little that is evil in our nature by making our lives unright separates us from God.

Third, God has made the attempt to harmonize our lives with His. He has done this not by making His conform with our's but by having our's conform to His. It is possible for an unright life to become right; for evil to become good; for crooked to become straight; for black to become white; for our lives crooked, crabbed, blackened and distorted, to become straight, sweet, clean and natural. Wonderful Alchemist! The lapidary seizes a cloudy, dull-looking stone and rubs and polishes and grinds until the sight is dazzled by the brilliancy of the diamond which glitters and sparkles in the light. So God takes hold of a crude, unprepossessing nature and under his wonderful mechanism develop a quality which was before present? No. More wonderful is this work than that of the lapidary with the uncut stone. God puts into the creature feelings which never were present before. The old man passes away and there is a new man in his stead. New in all that constitutes a man. His desires, feelings, tastes, thoughts, are new. This is how God harmonizes and makes right the creature. By His plan He settles the difference between His nature and man's. He harmonizes the two not by making His wrong, but by making the man's life right. He "rightifies" or justifies the man.